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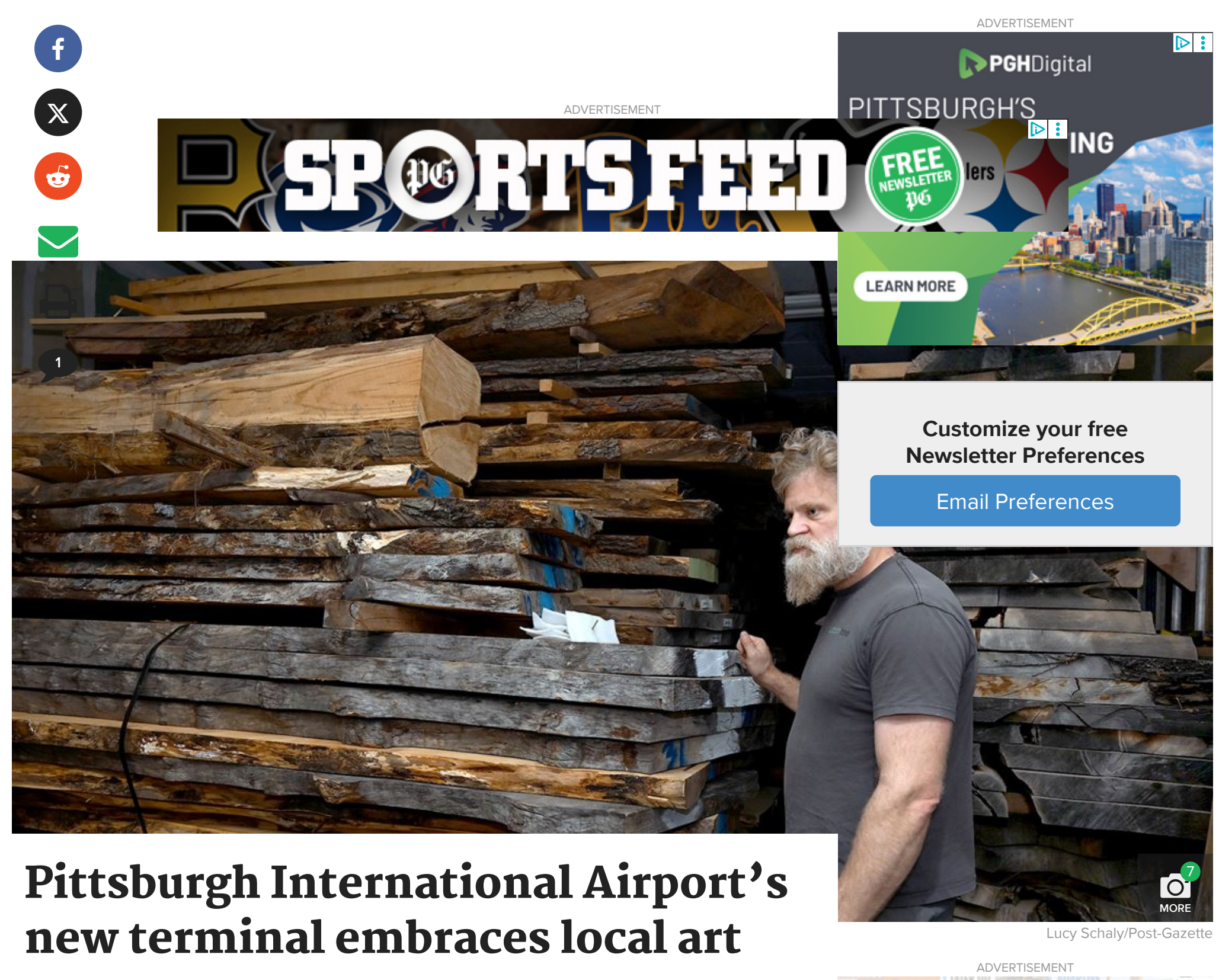

Lucy Schaly/Post-Gazette

Pittsburgh International Airport's new terminal embraces local art

From the Calder piece to the wooden frames holding the arrivals/departures screens, local artists are adding to the project's visual appeal

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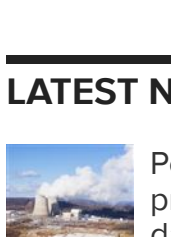
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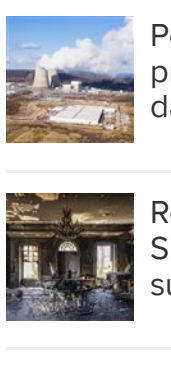
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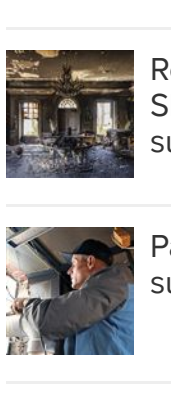
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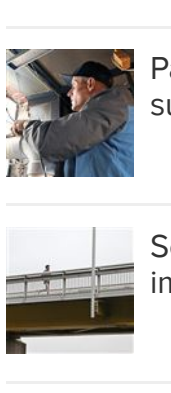
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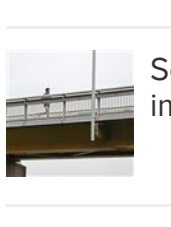
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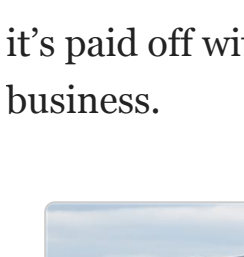
Jason Boone felt a certain amount of satisfaction in his Homewood workshop as he stood in front of one of the wood-framed Flight Information Displays that would soon guide travelers through Pittsburgh International Airport's new terminal.

The display, and its 16 companions ticketed for the arrivals and departures levels, have dominated Mr. Boone's thoughts for the past year, ever since airport executives approached his small team at Urban Tree about contributing to the $1.7 billion terminal project.

It's by far the largest commission he and his four employees have ever worked on, to the point where they brought in a few extra hands to help complete the frames.

Mr. Boone, sawdust clinging to his work pants, took a few steps back to appraise his design amid the shop's noise. It has been a time-consuming and stressful process, he said, but he feels as if it's paid off with a high-visibility product that will help his business.


Adam Babetski
Pittsburgh International Airport's new terminal is opening soon. First, volunteers need to test it.

"It's been an honor to be a part of this project and [build] one of the things that people interact with in the airport the most," he said.

In total, Pittsburgh International's new terminal features work from 15 artists, mostly Western Pennsylvanians, assembled and supervised by the airport's arts and culture manager, Keny Marshall.

Airport CEO Christina Cassotis said that her team's goal was not simply to build an airport for Pittsburgh, but to build "Pittsburgh's airport," with plenty of local contributions.

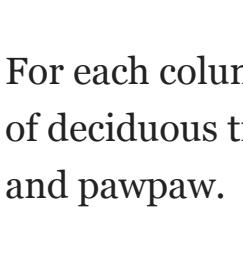
"It needed to reflect and serve this community by bringing in the assets of the community and putting them on display for the world to see," she said. "We know that Pittsburgh punches way above its weight when it comes to arts and culture."

'Walking on the sky'

The structure of the new terminal, designed by the firms Gensler and HDR as well as Spanish architect Luis Vidal, is intended to mirror the region's natural beauty. Its roof is modeled after the region's rolling hills; support columns in the departures level sport sets of "branches" meant to represent trees.

Murrysville artist Clayton Merrell focused on accentuating that effect with some 60 aluminum leaves pressed onto the terminal's terrazzo floor around the base of the columns.

For each column, Mr. Merrell chose leaves from different species of deciduous trees native to the region, including silver maple and pawpaw.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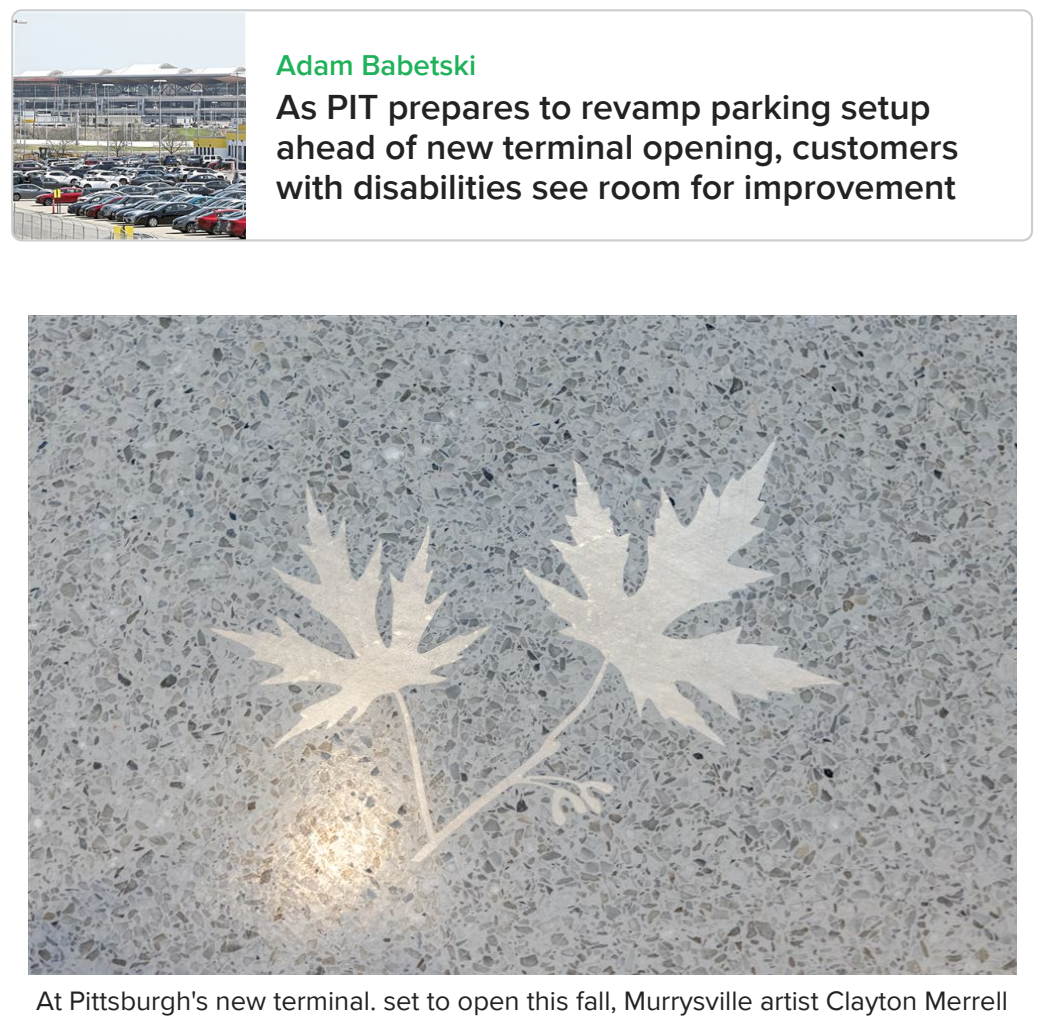


At Pittsburgh's new terminal, set to open this fall, Murrysville artist Clayton Merrell added around 60 aluminum leaves pressed onto the terminal's terrazzo floor. (Pittsburgh Post-Gazette)

Next, Mr. Merrell traced a handful of real leaves from each kind of tree and turned the drawings into vector files on his computer so they could be sized without losing their quality. He sent the files to a fabricator who cut the shapes with a water jet out of quarter-inch-thick sheets of aluminum.

Mr. Merrell said that he would like the leaves to serve as "Easter eggs" that add whimsy to the terminal and make it feel more like an outdoor environment.

"I would like it to be a moment of discovery," he said. "I think there's something fun about finding something in a space — that moment where you notice something and realize, 'Wait a minute, there's more here than immediately meets the eye.' "

Chances are, you've already seen Mr. Merrell's largest contribution to Pittsburgh International. When the airport renovated the center core of the airside terminal a decade ago, he was responsible for designing its 69,000 square foot floor, which is modeled after the sky.

That design is set to expand by 13,000 feet to connect with the new terminal's arrivals level, forming a continuous image.

A painstaking process

The airport intended for the ceiling to be made of local wood, but due to safety concerns had to pivot to metal beams painted to resemble the aesthetic.

Urban Tree's Flight Information Displays are made from real white oak, though. Each of the company's displays is unique, handcrafted from fallen trees that stood in Pittsburgh's dense inner-city forests and neighborhoods. Unlike pristine commercial lumber, trees from urban areas are of unknown health and inconsistent growth.

It's up to Mr. Boone and his crew to find the beauty in their imperfections.

Back at his workshop, Mr. Boone ran his hand over a darkened spot on one of the three remaining unfinished frames to point out where the tree had grown over a branch it had lost — a detail that he left to maintain its character.

"That's the story of an urban tree," he said.

Urban Tree — the company — has a story of its own. Its original founder, John Metzler, got inspiration from a microburst — a strong, downward stream of wind — that broke off branches and uprooted trees during a thunderstorm in 2008.

After Mr. Metzler's life was cut short in a car accident two years later, Mr. Boone continued his mission to recycle Pittsburgh's overlooked lumber. The company still sources more than 75% of its materials locally, he said, mostly from residents who donate trees on their property in exchange for removal.

Preparing a tree to become furniture is a painstaking process that can take up to two years. Urban Tree workers split the logs using a sawmill in their building's parking lot before moving them to a wood kiln, which is vacuum-sealed to mimic a high-altitude atmosphere in order to slowly draw water out of the tree cells.

It's a sight to behold. The factory's bulky freight elevator rumbles to a stop and Mr. Boone steps out among 800-plus slabs of wood, each pressed up against one another with hardly an inch to spare. Mr. Boone quipped that he's guided by his OCD when organizing his stock, so he's basically the only one who knows what's where. Every client has different needs, though, so even if he has the perfect piece of wood in mind, extracting it from the cramped space requires a "forklift and a lot of effort."

Mr. Boone said that Pittsburgh International's design team was impressed by one of his more unusual table designs when they visited Urban Tree last October, which he later used as inspiration for his frames. Instead of shaving off tree bark, he split a board in half and turned the bark sides inwards, filling in the resulting gap with resin and preserving the tree's unique characteristics.

The new terminal's frames have a similar design, as well as some "nerdy" details that Mr. Boone and his team added, such as rounded corners and a protective coating of epoxy. Mr. Boone left a small gap between the frame and its metal components to allow for the wood to expand in the summer heat.

Yoder Industries, a laser cutting service in Lancaster, shipped Urban Tree several dozen prefabricated metal pieces for each frame that workers then fit together by hand. Urban Tree then took the frame apart three or four times to check for any structural issues and make sure that the final product was sturdy enough for daily use.

Mr. Boone hauls the disassembled displays one by one in his truck to the terminal as Urban Tree completes them. By mid-September, he had three left to deliver.

One of those three held a TV screen that Mr. Boone paid around $4,000 for out of pocket to test the frames; the terminal's screens will come from a separate contractor. It's an additional expense, but Mr. Boone said he is more focused on the quality of his creations than the final profit margin.

"I didn't feel right doing the job without buying one to make sure that everything is working," he said. "We're a pretty high-end shop, and everything should be as perfect as it can be when it arrives."

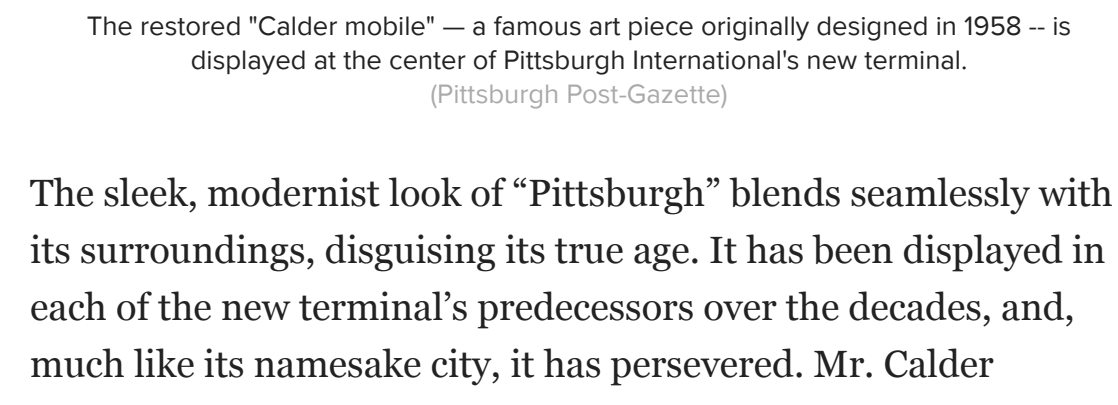
The Calder piece's long journey

The terminal's centerpiece, fittingly titled "Pittsburgh," is an abstract and cunningly interactive sculpture by Pennsylvania-born artist Alexander Calder, created in 1958.

The 400-pound black-and-white structure, crafted from painted aluminum and steel, is known as a "mobile" and looks a bit like a tree branch, similar to the new columns surrounding it.

The mobile is designed to tilt at an almost imperceptible speed as visitors walk by and create wind, moving the mobile in different directions, according to Alex J. Taylor, a Calder expert and an associate art professor at the University of Pittsburgh.

"It's very unlikely that the work is ever the same two times that you see it," he said.



The restored "Calder mobile" — a famous art piece originally designed in 1958 — is displayed at the center of Pittsburgh International's new terminal. (Pittsburgh Post-Gazette)

The sleek, modernist look of "Pittsburgh" blends seamlessly with its surroundings, disguising its true age. It has been displayed in each of the new terminal's predecessors over the decades, and, much like its namesake city, it has persevered. Mr. Calder originally designed "Pittsburgh" for the Carnegie Institute's grand staircase and wanted it to hang low to the ground so that visitors could touch it, Mr. Taylor said. It was a different era, before most art was cordoned off.

A local private collector, G. David Thompson, purchased the mobile a year later and donated it to Pittsburgh International in memory of his late son, where it soon became infamous for what Mr. Taylor deemed a "textbook case of mistreating public art."

Just after they acquired "Pittsburgh," airport officials repainted the mobile green and yellow to match Allegheny County's color scheme and modified its structure to prevent it from moving — seemingly failing to understand that it was a work of art, Mr. Taylor said.

Mr. Calder complained about the changes. He and the airport reached a compromise in 1960 to repaint the mobile red so that it would still stand out against the terminal's white walls, but something went sideways during the process, and the resulting product came out as a garish shade of pink or salmon.

Local artists carried on Mr. Calder's protest after his death in 1976, calling out the piece's deteriorating condition and unflattering location above a merchandise booth in the landside building in letters to the Post-Gazette.

"Please let it stand alone as an object of art," Charles C. Arensberg, then-chairman of the Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation, wrote in a 1977 letter. "No sales exhibit, no promotional displays — just the unique rotunda that is Pittsburgh Airport's pride."

Pittsburgh International responded to mounting public pressure in 1979 by sending the mobile back to the Carnegie Museum, which restored it to its original color and function.

The museum held onto the mobile for exhibitions for 13 years until it returned to the airport to coincide with the current terminal's grand opening in 1992. However, its position at the top of the escalators leading from the trains was obscured by advertisements and clutter from nearby businesses for the next 33 years, Mr. Taylor said, preventing travelers from truly appreciating it.

That changes this fall. The Ohio-based conservation laboratory McKay Lodge last month gently lifted the mobile from obscurity and installed it in its current prominent position, finding that the piece was in good condition despite its age and winding journey.

The mobile's new home high above the ground may not have been what Mr. Calder originally intended, but it's a tasteful tribute that highlights its unique form, Mr. Taylor said.

"It's a sign of Calder's brilliance that these works still look as fresh as they do as they did nearly 100 years ago," he said.

A terminal inspired by the region — and art

"Pittsburgh" will share the space with many other examples of abstract art in the new terminal.

Pittsburgh-native John Peña's installation of suitcases in the baggage claim are programmed to spit out more than 1,000 phrases communicating their "thoughts" via split-flap boards found in old airports.

Peruvian artist Fredy Huaman Mallqui's formless wood sculptures, themed to signify "connections," endlessly reach out toward one another on the opposite side of the baggage claim area.

And if you've ever lost a pair of sunglasses or headphones at Pittsburgh International, you might want to check Alisha B. Wormsley's "Portals," a collage outside of international arrivals crafted from lost-and-found items.

That level of detail even continues to the restrooms, where several feature 3D-printed ceramic wall tiles designed by Pittsburgher Brian Peters that represent the region's bumpy topography. Murals adorn the three levels of restrooms near the center of the terminal, each floor designed by a different artist.

Chris Craychee's "Surrounding Waterways, 2025," using 360-degree photographs of the Three Rivers Heritage Trail, adorns the departures level. Njaimeh Njie's "Looking Up From Here," on the arrivals level, is a series of collages representing the diversity of a Pittsburgh street.

Lori Hepner, a new-media artist from Brighton Heights, completes the ensemble with "Something about the Sky," a pair of glass panels on the lowest floor bearing long-exposure photos of clouds that she transformed into "flowing streams of light" using wearable LEDs.

Ms. Hepner created the pieces in her studio on Penn State Greater Allegheny's campus in McKeesport, where she works her day job as a professor of integrative arts.

"The students can actually see what it's like for an actual artist to be creating artwork, which is a really awesome thing to be able to show them," she said.

Ms. Hepner typically displays her art as prints on canvas and said that she was excited to see her work transferred to glass for the first time. A third-party company — with a far larger budget than she has — fused her prints between panes of glass, cooling them before they were installed so they will last as long as the terminal.

The pieces also mark the largest permanent installations of Ms. Hepner's career, each measuring 9 ½ feet tall by 18 feet wide, though they are partially obscured behind the walls of the restrooms.

Ms. Hepner began experimenting with emerging LED technology in 2009 by coupling the medium with her idea to translate Twitter posts into binary code, which produced multicolored, contorted shapes. But a single LED bulb cost $250 at the time and the computer program she was using was unable to handle processing images until about five years later.

Sometimes, even artists living on the cutting edge have to be patient.

"I knew I needed to wait a little bit for the technology to sort of catch up," Ms. Hepner said.

Photos have allowed Ms. Hepner to add meaning to her artwork, she said. In "Something about the Sky," she used a photo taken in Pittsburgh with another she took just after deplaning in San Diego.

Together, they represent a successful flight — Pittsburgh International's goal for countless travelers soon to pass through the new terminal.

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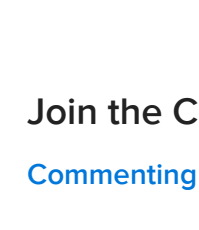
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